

With the Hercules aka the "Spruce Goose" in the background, Howard Hughes (Leonardo DiCaprio) and Ava Gardner (Kate Beckinsdale) talk.



ANDREW COOPER, MIRAMAX FILMS, 2004

The Maverick

Celebrity genius

THE AVIATOR: Directed by Martin Scorsese. Written by John Logaa. Produced by Michael Mann, Sandy Climan, Graham King, Charles Evans Jr. Executive producer, Chris Brigham. Cinematography, Robert Richardson. Editor, Thelma Schoonmaker. Production design, Dante Ferretti. Costume design, Sandy Powell. Starring Leonardo DiCaprio, with Cate Blanchett, John C. Reilly, Alec Baldwin, Kate Beckinsdale and Jude Law. Also with Matt Ross, Adam Scott, Gwen Stefani, Ian Holm, Danny Huston, Alan Alda and Kelli Garner. Miramax Films, 2004. PG-13. 169 minutes.

Poor little rich boy: Orphaned by age 18, Texas-born Howard Hughes inherited Hughes Tool, the lucrative company his late father had built. He immediately began spending his fortune on the production of a film epic called *Hell's Angels*, which cost \$3.8 million and took years to make. Hughes continued to make films while escorting a number of film beauties around town, but all along, flying was his one true passion.

In one of the film's sweetest scenes, Hughes (Leonardo DiCaprio) invites Kate Hepburn (Cate Blanchett) for a late night spin above Los Angeles in a plane from the private fleet he built for filming *Hell's Angels*. Kate is game. Here, take the wheel, Hughes says, and she does. Two odd birds, their mutual attraction bonds them in a friendship that lasts long after the affair cools. Their relationship resonates because Hughes allows Kate to see his unstable inner life. She understands his demons, and her recognition of them makes her one of the few people he can trust.

Noah Dietrich (John C. Reilly) is another. When Hughes founds Hughes Aircraft in 1932, "Diet" becomes his life-long "second in command," the one who always tells him the truth and always does what he wants in regard to his businesses. As a young man, Hughes was so full of ideas that he needed a well-grounded, solid business partner to manage his financial affairs. Dietrich always understood the boundaries of their relationship.

Another right-hand man was Glenn Odekirk (Matt Ross), the aeronautical engineer who created prototypes of major developments in aviation of the 20th century from Hughes's futuristic designs and specifications. "Ode" tried to keep Hughes' risk-taking behavior to a minimum, but no force on earth could keep the guy from flying. It was his life and nearly his death.

Stepping in for a brief appearance, Jude Law captures the devil-may-care reputation of action movie star Errol Flynn in a scene at the Cocoanut Grove, Hollywood's '40s hang-out. Gwen Stefani, known as the lead singer for No Doubt, plays the blonde bombshell, Jean Harlow. And Ian Holm plays a slightly

befuddled Professor Fitz, who gets the ride of his life in the Hercules' only flight.

The film's most thrilling sequences is Hughes' 1946 plane crash of the experimental XF-11 into residences in Beverly Hills, in part because it perfectly explores his incredi-

ble will to live in the face of near-certain death.

The trajectory of the film narrative requires DiCaprio to age 20 years or so, and he does so gracefully, the older man gradually coming into possession of the exuberant younger man's personality and demeanor. His award-worthy performance will be noted.

A four-star film by any cinematic standard, *The Aviator* is a beauty.

Hughes's long descent into madness was not diagnosed during the 20-years period of the film — the late 1920s through the late 1940s. His breakdowns began in the mid-1940s. He suffered from what is now recognized as obsessive-compulsive behavior with paranoia, and the episodes became both more debilitating and more frequent. In the early phases of his mental illness, Howard could recover enough to work. But by the mid-'60s, he became a reclusive eccentric. He died in April of 1976, recognizable only from his fingerprints.

Scorsese brought along two of his long-time collaborators: editor Thelma Schoonmaker, who has worked on all his pic-

tures, and production designer Dante Ferretti, who collaborated on *The Age of Innocence*, *Casino*, *Kundun*, *Bringing out the Dead* and *Gangs of New York*. Costume designer Sandy Powell also worked on *Gangs*. Cinematographer Robert Richardson worked with the director on *Casino* (1995) and *Bringing out the Dead* (1999). The quality of technical support they bring to *The Aviator*

help make the project "a Scorsese film," even though the director was hired by DiCaprio and the script was written by John Logan.

A four-star film by any cinematic standard, *The Aviator* is a beauty. Critics who assert the film doesn't show enough of Hughes' dark side wanted a different picture, one that didn't get made. This portrait of the young aeronautical designer, business entrepreneur, maverick filmmaker and futurist can stand on its own, strong merits.

Now showing at Cinemark and Cinema World, *The Aviator* receives my very highest recommendations. Footnote: The Spruce Goose resides in an aviation museum in McMinnville. **EW**

The Phantom Lover

Kinky

THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA: Composer, producer, writer Andrew Lloyd Webber. Writer, director Joel Schumacher. Executive producer Austin Shaw, Paul Hitchcock. Cinematographer, John Mathieson. Production design, Anthony Pratt. Editor, Terry Rawlings. Alexandra Byrne. Visual effects supervisor, Nathan McGuinness. Choreographer, Peter Darling. Music co-producer, Nigel Wright. Music supervisor, Simon Lee. Starring Gerard Butler, Emmy Rossum and Patrick Wilson, with Miranda Richardson and Minnie Driver. Warner Bros., 2004. PG-13. 113 minutes.

Where is Baz Luhrmann when you need him? If ever a movie needed the sure hand of the Australian master film stylist and self-described "mythomaniac," it is this screen version of Andrew Lloyd Webber's successful, long-running stage production of his hoary chestnut, *The Phantom of the Opera*. Lloyd Webber wrote the score in 1986, when the play debuted in London, where it is still running. Harold Prince brought it to Broadway in 1988, and now Joel Schumacher (*Batman Forever*, 1995) brings it to the screen.

Unlike Luhrmann's lush, pop-operatic Red Curtain trilogy, *Strictly Ballroom* (1992), *Romeo and Juliet* (1996) and *Moulin Rouge* (2001), Schumacher's vision is pure kitsch. Luhrmann astonished the audience as Romeo walked through the opulent, candle-light saturated tomb where Juliet lay. Unlike Luhrmann, Schumacher creates a smothering atmosphere, overusing candles as the Phantom (Gerard Butler) poles the gondola bearing his captive lover (Emmy Rossum) to his underground lair. One creates a Baroque, Catholic awe with the multitude of candles, while the other uses CGI to bring lighted candles up from the water!

Although I never saw the Lloyd Webber/Prince stage production, Jorge Morales, writing for the *Village Voice*, did. "Prince's magic covered the show's many flaws — thin plot, pedestrian lyrics, and schmaltzy derivative score — like so much mechanical fog. Schumacher enlarges them," Morales wrote.

Aye, that's the problem. Everything in the movie is overblown but underwhelming — the costumes, the singing, the dancing, the love songs. Lloyd Webber's music for *Phantom* is often called ear-worms in reviews, and it is an apt description for the sensibility of much of the music, with inane, repetitive lyrics of longing, with no consumation in sight. In *Moulin Rouge* Luhrmann made a straightforward, brilliant decision. He took rock favorites and reimagined them as love songs. Powerful. Original.

Third point: The characters in Luhrmann's work are full of life and love. Even the minor characters celebrate their passions — think



ALEX BAILEY, WARNER BROS., 2004

of the show-stopper "Roseann," danced as blood-lust tango by fully fleshed supporting characters, not the stars.

But little or no chemistry flares between the Schumacher's major characters — Butler, Rossum and Patrick Wilson (as Raoul de Chagny), with the exception of the sword fight between the men, which stirs up something intense. But Rossum appears hypnotized when she's in Butler's presence, and he is a perfect ghostly lover, pale and cruel. Wilson comes across as a determined but not too romantic lover. The minor characters, while bizarre, at least kept me interested. Miranda Richardson is haunting as Madame Giry, while Carlotta, played over-the-top by Minnie Driver, is a sly buffoon.

Those who saw the play on stage and loved it, will probably like the screen version more than I did. I wanted to see what all the fuss was about and was disappointed.

Now playing at Cinemark, the film is too schmaltzy to recommend. **EW**